

Message

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Subject: Bloomberg Environment: Three Controversial Chemicals Top EPA's Pesticide To-Do List

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Three Controversial Chemicals Top EPA's Pesticide To-Do List

<https://news.bloombergenvironment.com/environment-and-energy/three-controversial-chemicals-top-epas-pesticide-to-do-list?context=article-related>

By Adam Allington, 5/6/19

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to review new science on a number of high-profile pesticides in the coming months to support any possible decisions.

In a May 6 interview with Bloomberg Environment, Alexandra Dapolito Dunn, EPA's assistant administrator for chemical safety and pollution prevention, said the agency won't shy away from re-registering disputed pesticides, as long as they're based on "evolving science."

The agency is particularly focused on chlorpyrifos, dicamba, and glyphosate, all of which have come under increased public scrutiny over claims they pose both ecological, and health-related risks.

Front and center is the popular pesticide chlorpyrifos, which lawmakers in several states are trying to ban, while the EPA has sought keep it on the market. The pesticide is used on a variety of vegetable, fruit, and nut crops.

Chlorpyrifos Under Scrutiny

Chlorpyrifos was approved for re-registration in 2006. However, in 2017 EPA recommended putting aside the conclusions reached by its own staff scientists and rejected an Obama-era proposal to ban chlorpyrifos for use in fields and orchards.

"We do stand behind the regulatory decision of 2006 and again want to be informed by any new science that is coming our way," Dunn said. "It's been extensive. And certainly our activities around chlorpyrifos extend to the other organophosphates as well."

Court Order for Action

Chlorpyrifos is a member of the organophosphate class of pesticides that kill insects on contact by attacking their nervous systems. Several studies have linked chlorpyrifos exposure to developmental issues in children.

On April 19, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit gave the EPA 90 days, until mid-July, to take action on demands from environmental groups to ban the chemical, which is primarily made by DowDupont Inc.'s agriculture division, Corteva Agriscience.

"Certainly, responding to the court on chlorpyrifos is front and center right now," said Dunn.

While environmental groups are pressuring EPA for a full ban on food crops, Dunn seemed to indicate the agency still has several years to review updated science.

“We have committed to prioritizing the re-registration of chlorpyrifos. Under the statute [the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act], we have until October 2022,” she said. “We recognize that there’s a great desire for us to make a decision before that time and we are moving as quickly as possible with regard to making a scientifically-based decision.”

Studies on Brain Damage

Any decision that keeps chlorpyrifos on the market would likely force the agency back to court to defend that decision on its merits.

The agency has been fighting a lawsuit from a coalition of environmental groups for years over concerns chlorpyrifos posed a threat to children’s health.

“EPA can’t hide behind a decision that was made back in 2006, the court already said as much when EPA made that same claim in 2015,” said Patti Goldman, an attorney with Earthjustice serving as co-counsel for a coalition of environmental health groups suing EPA over the pesticide.

She said the 2006 registration of the pesticide, which kept it on the market, didn’t consider damage to children’s brains, which was shown in subsequent studies.

“When EPA did finally look at this, it found this pesticide unsafe,” she said.

Dicamba Complaints of Drift

On dicamba, many state regulators have been bracing for 2019 to be another year of intense complaints about off-target damage from the herbicide as it drifts onto neighboring soybean and other fields. The EPA in October said it would extend the label through the 2020 application season. That would apply to dicamba-based herbicides XtendiMax from Bayer, FeXapan from Corteva, and Engenia from BASF.

The EPA also announced several changes to the label, including the time of application, record-keeping, and wind speed, and only allowed certified applicators to buy and apply the product.

“This is one of those deals where there just doesn’t seem to be an end in sight,” said Tim Creger, pesticide program manager at the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, speaking at a conference of pesticide State Lead Agencies on March 5.

Creger told Bloomberg Environment that in 2018 Nebraska saw the number of dicamba complaints increase, and he thinks there’s a high chance that will happen again in 2019.

When asked what another year of numerous reports of off-target damage would mean to dicamba’s future, Dunn said the agency is walking a fine line between providing access to an important tool for farmers, and protecting the rights of other stakeholders.

“We certainly updated the label to add restrictions to minimize drift—that is important,” she said, adding that the agency and dicamba makers were also working on field testing during this growing season.

“That information that we will receive at the end of this year will be extremely helpful to us to figure out what the next steps are for dicamba,” she said.

Glyphosate Lawsuits Complicate Safety Review

Despite being the most commercially popular herbicide on the market, glyphosate has been at the center of a dispute on whether exposure causes cancer.

The pesticide is the active ingredient in Roundup, produced by Bayer AG, which acquired the brand after its 2018 purchase of St. Louis-based Monsanto. Thousands of lawsuits filed in recent years have alleged that the herbicide caused cancer.

But in an interim registration review on April 30, the EPA found that glyphosate poses no risk to human health when used according to the label.

“The label is the law, the label is the roadmap for safety,” Dunn said.

She said the agency did find some ecological risks and has proposed some mitigation measures that would reduce effects on pollinators, aquatic plants, and other species. But she also said communicating glyphosate’s safety has become harder with so much media coverage of the court cases.

“We acknowledge that there will always be a larger public conversation around pesticides,” she said. “EPA is committed to making science-based decisions and emphasizing to the public how we make those decisions.”